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ABSTRACT

The issue of the perceived success of human services program evaluations is the specific focus of this paper. Five areas that affect the potential for producing effective program evaluation form a framework for discussing factors related to perceived success. The areas include inappropriate conceptualization of what an evaluation can accomplish, what to evaluate and how to evaluate. Inappropriate recognition of the limitations of existing program data and inappropriate training of most evaluators also affect the evaluation. There is little consensus about what constitutes a successful evaluation, beyond the recognition that success is related to the utilization of the information generated through the evaluation process. Some consider success to be the extent to which information generated on the impact of the program affects policy decisions regarding the future of that program. Some view an evaluation as "successful" if the program is better articulated. Others expect the information generated by the evaluation to lead to more effective management. In other words, perceived success of program evaluations has a variety of meanings for the same and different audiences. (Author/CM)

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PROGRAM EVALUATION

WHY IT SELDOM IS PERCEIVED AS A SUCCESS

by

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and
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There is a growing realization that, while the demand for program evaluations is expanding rapidly, completed evaluations are rarely perceived to be "successful". There are dangers inherent in this paradox which may undermine the validity of the entire evaluation process.

The issue of the perceived success of program evaluations is the specific focus of this paper. Five areas that affect the potential for producing effective program evaluation form a framework for discussing factors related to perceived success.

What constitutes a successful evaluation? There is little consensus around this issue beyond the recognition that success is related to the utilization of the information generated through the evaluation process. Some consider success to be the extent to which information generated on the impact of the program affects policy decisions regarding the future of that program. Some view an evaluation as "successful" if the program is better articulated. Others expect the information generated by the evaluation to lead to more effective management, etc. In other words, perceived success of program evaluations has a variety of meanings for the same and different audiences.

AREAS THAT AFFECT THE POTENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAM EVALUATIONS.

Five areas that affect the potential for producing effective program evaluations are listed. These areas form a framework for examining and elaborating on the issue of perceived success as it relates to effective program evaluations.

1. Inapproprate conceptualization of what a program evaluation can accomplish.

2. Inappropriate conceptualization of what to evaluate.

3. Inappropriate recognition of the limitations of existing program data for evaluation purposes.

4. Inappropriate conceptualization of how to evaluate.

5. Inappropriate training of most evaluators.

The balance of this paper is devoted to a disucssion of factors within each of these five areas that affect perceived success of program evaluations. The paper limits its discussion to program evaluations, which are evaluations of human service programs.

1. <u>INAPPROPRIATE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WHAT A PROGRAM EVALUATION CAN ACCOMPLISH</u>.

Program evaluations are not unidimensional. They cannot be viewed from the perspective of a single success criterion.

There are many reasons for undertaking evaluations (Chelinsky 1978, Rossi 1979, Rutman 1980). Of these, three broad categories are generally accepted. These are evaluations undertaken for:

a) accountability and audit purposes where monitoring, verification and fund allocation considerations predominate,

b) management and administrative purposes where evaluation is primarily a management tool and

c) policy and planning purposes where decisions on expansion or curtailment of the programs are expected to follow the evaluation.

Viewed from another perspective, there are various approaches to evaluation. They range on a continuum from performing process evaluations, which focus on operating programs and their actual implementation, to doing outcome evaluations which focus on the impact of the program. Many view outcome or impact information and its effect on policy and planning as THE legitimate role for all evaluations. They view success in terms of the accuracy of the outcome information generated and the extent to which this information affects decisions about the future of the program.

This is an inappropriate conceptualization of what determines success. It ignores the significant impact of process evaluations on how managers operate their programs. Often it places too little emphasis on the program operation, on effectiveness or efficiency issues, or on other criteria that could be legitimately considered a successful utilization of the information generated.

In other words, there is often a inappropriate conceptualization of what a program evaluation can accomplish. Various reasons for conducting evaluations and different methods of conducting them can have a significant impact on the potential uses (and abuses) of the information generated. If program evaluations are not to be inappropriately tarnished with the perception of failure, this point must be understood, accepted and emphasized by evaluators and others involved in evaluations.

2. INAPPROPRIATE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WHAT TO EVALUATE

There is a lack of concensus on the definition of terms such as needs, programs, services and activities. This leads to inappropriate conceptualization of what to evaluate. Confusion of terms confounds the issue of determining if a program evaluation is successful, since measuring the success of "something" assumes the "something" is appropriately defined and understood.

Figure I provides a framework that outlines and defines major categories utilized in the conceptualization of what to evaluate in human service organizations. It begins with the concept of need or goal. This basic concept often is defined inappropriately. For instance, many acknowledge the "need" for day-care, for protected housing for the disabled and for more recreation and social services. Yet from an evaluator's perspective these are NOT needs. They are program strategies. The need is not day-care but an enriched environment for the child, providing an opportunity for mothers to fulfill themselves through further education or work, etc. The need is not protected housing, but to optimize the potential

FIGURE I

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

MAJOR CATEGORIES UTILIZED IN CONCEPTUALIZING HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS	DEFINITIONS OF THE MAJOR CATEGORIES	COMPONENTS OF THE MAJOR CATEGORIES
Overall NEED (or goal)	A general statement of optimal states of desired human conditions for a special segment or of all of mankind.	Basic Human needs sometimes referred to as quality of life indicators.
OVERALL Agency or Organization OBJECTIVE (or goal)	An operational statement of the rationale for the existence of the organization that links an organized response to a perceived need or needs.	The overall need or needs to which the organization is responding -PLUS- A general indication of the broad strategies the organization employs to meet this need.
Human Service PROGRAM	A group of services and activities undertaken as an organized response to assist in meeting the objectives of an organization.	One or more services which logically cluster together as an organized response to meeting the organizations objectives.
PROGRAM OBJECTIVE	A statement of a strategy and rationale for an organized response to meeting the objectives of the organization.	The specific strategy of the program -PLUS- the overall need to which this program strategy is responding.
SERVICE	Specific identifiable organized procedures undertaken to assist in meeting a program objective.	An organized cluster of individual activities that are logically associated with each other. Services are the major elements of a human service program.
ACTIVITY	A specific identifiable discrete task.	Specific, narrowly-defined tasks such as driving or completing forms. When combined with other tasks that cluster together, these tasks form a service.

for the disabled to lead a normal life, etc. The need is not recreation but to optimize physical well-being, etc.

If the need (as in these examples) is defined in terms of the program strategy, the success of the program becomes a "numbers game" of measuring how much more of that strategy is provided; more day-care, more housing units, more recreation. Logically most agree that these are inappropriate success criteria, yet little effort is expended in defining appropriately the needs to which organizations and programs are responding.

Figure I illustrates how organization and program objectives rationally link overall needs to program strategies. Figure II is an example of how an organization can utilize the evaluation framework. It shows how an organization can be conceptualized, using the first three categories outlined in Figure I. It illustrates how a process evaluation can affect an organization's ability to reconceptualize its programs and their potential impact. As a result of this process the organization can generate new information that should provide significantly better indications of the actual effects (outcome) of their programs.

To define needs as optimal states of desired human conditions, and programs as specific strategies undertaken to help achieve these desired states, sounds relatively simple, where in fact these definitions are difficult to operationalize. Differentiating among programs, services and activities is not a straight forward procedure. It is an art form.

FIGURE II

AN EXAMPLE OF AN ORGANIZATION
UTILIZING THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Overall NEED (or goal)

To optimize the potential of heart-disease patients and their families to lead a normal life.

OVERALL Organization OBJECTIVE (or goal)

To optimize the potential of heart-disease patients and their families to lead a normal life by providing opportunities for both to: a) learn more about their potential to normalize their lives and,
b) share their concerns with others who have experienced similar traumas.

Human Service PROGRAMS

1. Hospital/Pre-discharge Support Program

Objective: to assist in reducing the emotional stress arising from a cardiac crisis by:

(a) providing an opportunity for patient, spouse and family to communicate and respond to perceived problems related to their cardiac episode and recovery.

(b) providing reassurance of continued support through an explanation of Heart to Heart and other community resources available to them.

2. Family Series Program

Objective: to assist in the achievement of an optimum lifestyle for heart-disease patients and their families by:

(a) providing information, education and support through a series of group sessions.

(b) providing an opportunity to communicate and respond on a one-to-one basis with professionals.

(c) providing an opportunity for participants in the series to share mutual concerns and experience.

(d) encouraging utilization of appropriate community resources.

3. Community Liaison Program

Objective: to optimize the potential for members of the medical, professional and community-at-large to respond positively to problems related to heart disease by:

(a) assisting in the development of support programs for heart attack patients and their families.

(b) creating an awareness of the problem as perceived by heart attack patients and their families.

(c) creating an awareness of the role of the family in the recovery of heart attack patients.

(d) encouraging the utilization of Heart Foundation resources, expertise, educational and health contacts in the community, literature, films and speakers.

(e) providing support and encouraging the utilization of appropriate community resources such as exercise programs counselling services, etc.

4. Alumni Program

Objective: to extend the opportunities for social support and personal well-being for participants of the Family Series by:

(a) providing a forum for participants to meet on a regular basis to continue sharing experiences and friendships.

(b) providing an opportunity for participants to receive further support and up-dated information.

(c) encourage participants to volunteer in on-going activities that further the work of Heart to Heart and Ontario Heart Foundation.

For evaluators, appropriate definitions of needs, programs, services and activities that are related to the organization being evaluated cannot be assumed or left to program staff to define without guidance. Figure III extends the profile of one of the programs referred to in Figure II. The specific services and activities employed to meet the program objectives are displayed, as is the relationship between a program, service and activity. The program is shown to consist of a cluster of services, and the services to be made up of clusters of activities (many of which are not spelled out in this example).

Evaluators often ignore or only superficially address the issues raised above. This is an important factor that later in the evaluation process seriously affects the perceived success of the evaluation.

3. INAPPROPRIATE RECOGNITION OF THE LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING PROGRAM DATA FOR EVALUATION PURPOSES.

Most evaluators, while giving lip service to carefully defining programs and objectives, build their evaluations upon existing conceptualizations and information presented to them by program managers. This is a serious error that affects the entire evaluation.

Truisms such as "how can you evaluate when you don't know what you're evaluating" are ignored as evaluators and program managers spew out reams of irrelevant data. For instance, per diem costs of residential care are collected

FIGURE III

PROGRAM PROFILE OF AN ORGANIZATION

UTILIZING THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Program #2: Family Series Program

OBJECTIVE: to assist in the achievement of an optimum lifestyle for heart disease patients by:

4 MAJOR SERVICES OF THIS PROGRAM WITH MAJOR ACTIVITIES ASSOCIATED WITH EACH SERVICE

- (a) providing information, education and support through a series of group sessions.
  - (i) provide forum with informal atmosphere (circular seating) which encourages discussion, questions, sharing, expressing concerns.
  - (ii) provide educational materials (pamphlets from OHF, books, reading lists).
  - (iii) provide consultants who clearly present up to date information on various aspects of heart disease (clarify and confirm previously acquired information).
  - (iv) provide ample opportunity for questions in group.
  - (v) acquaint participants with resources in the community.
- (b) providing an opportunity to communicate and respond on a one-to-one basis with professionals.
  - (i) provide opportunity for participants to individually meet after presentation to discuss specific concerns with the leader and/or consultant.
  - (ii) provide office and leader's home telephone numbers.
- (c) providing an opportunity for participants in the series to share mutual concerns and experiences.
  - (i) facilitate interaction between participants by encouraging them to share their experiences and concerns with each other, by asking questions, asking for and giving feedback, using checklists, etc.
  - (ii) provide opportunity to meet and talk with each other after the presentation.
  - (iii) provide telephone numbers and addresses of all participants in group.
- (d) encourage utilization of appropriate community resources.
  - (i) encourage the utilization of community resources.
  - (ii) provide specific materials and information to individuals with specific concerns (e.g. stop smoking, resources in community)

without knowing what really happens to the client during the course of that day. Costs per adoption are analyzed without reference to changes in the profiles of those being adopted. As previously mentioned, defining the "need" as day-care makes "success" a numbers game of providing more day-care units, while ignoring what happens to the child involved in the day-care facility. Units of service rather than the effect of the service on the client become the focus.

Evaluators agree that it DOES matter if financial and program data are appropriate. Yet, they rationalize that time, money or limited mandates do not permit them to appropriately respond to these critical issues. They get on with the job of the "real" outcome evaluation with too little attention given to the issues related to the limitations of existing program data.

An illustration of inappropriate program conceptualization is outlined in Figure IV. This figure illustrates how a volunteer bureau typically conceptualizes its major programs. Figure V shows the major program as developed through the co-ordinated effects of volunteer bureau staff, volunteers, and an outside evaluator. The logic and content are substantially altered in Figure V. There is a more appropriate definition of what volunteer bureaus actually do. For example, administration is defined as a support service rather than a major program. The role of public relations as a support service for all programs is clarified. Programs are redefined to more rigorougsly deliniate services and the needs to which each program is responding.

FIGURE IV

AN ILLUSTRATION OF INAPPROPRIATE
PROGRAM CONCEPTUALIZATION

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF VOLUNTEER BUREAUX/CENTRES
INFORMATION SYSTEM

COMPONENT ONE - REFERRAL

RELATED GOAL: To increase the number of active and well placed volunteers in the community

ACTIVITIES: Registration; Referrals

COMPONENT TWO - PROMOTION

RELATED GOAL: To create and maintain an environment in the community conducive to voluntary participation and action.

ACTIVITIES: Talks; Special Events

COMPONENT THREE - EDUCATION

RELATED GOAL: To enhance the development and operation of effective voluntary programs in the community.

ACTIVITIES: Consultation; Training

COMPONENT FOUR - COMMUNITY RELATIONS

RELATED GOAL: To foster effective relationships and support co-ordinated and co-operative action between agencies to meet community needs.

ACTIVITIES: Liaison Meetings

COMPONENT FIVE - ADMINISTRATION

RELATED GOAL: To achieve the above goals of the Volunteer Bureaux/ Centres in an effective and efficient manner.

ACTIVITIES: Budget; Staffing

FIGURE V

AN ILLUSTRATION OF APPROPRIATELY CONCEPTUALIZED PROGRAMS

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF VOLUNTEER BUREAU/CENTRES

PROGRAM PROFILE

MAJOR PROGRAM AREAS	TYPICAL SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES IN EACH AREA		TYPICAL SUPPORT SERVICES				
			PUBLIC RELATIONS	FUND RAISING	RESEARCH	STAFF DEVELOPMENT (Training of in-house volunteers)	
1. SERVICES TO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS WISHING TO VOLUNTEER	1:1	Recruitment & interviewing					
	1:2	Referral by personal or telephone interviews.					
	1:3	Follow-up (a) initial with volunteer (b) final with volunteer (c) final with agency					
2. CO-ORDINATION OF ACTIVITIES WHICH ENCOURAGE EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS AND VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION	2:1	Facilitating training for agency volunteers.					
	2:2	Facilitating professional development of managers.					
	2:3	Facilitating awareness of potential for volunteers to participate.					
	2:4	Facilitating communication between volunteer co-ordinators.					
3. CONSULTATION RE: VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS AND VOLUNTEERISM	3:1	Consulting with agency re; Volunteer programs.					
	3:2	Consulting with individuals/ groups re: participation					
	3:3	Consulting re: volunteers with special needs.					
4. IMPROVEMENT OF STATUS OF VOLUNTEERS	4:1	Lobbying with any level of government and/or organizations for benefits/supports for volunteers.					
	4:2	Encouraging community recognition of the value of volunteers.					
5. SERVICES TO COMMUNITY	5:1	Sharing information with the general community on request.					
	5:2	The development of personal profiles (i.e. skill bank) in order to respond to agency requests for specialized skills.					
	5:3	Direct service- any program managed within the bureau.					

The point is that the data collected around programs such as those outlined in Figure IV are inappropriate for evaluation purposes. Despite this, evaluators tend to use existing data as if they were an appropriate base upon which to build their evaluations. The result is that the information generated by the evaluation is not effectively utilized, since it rarely reflects the contextual reality of the program.

Evaluators have the professional responsibility to avoid the accusation "we know better than we do." To build upon existing program data produced by most human service organizations is to limit the effective utilization and longer-term perceived success of the evaluation processes.

4. INAPPROPRIATE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HOW TO EVALUATE.

Evaluations should not be formulated on the basis of a standardized methodological format. A number of studies of evaluations have confirmed an inverse relationship: the BETTER the methodology, the LESS the utilization. (Rossi et al., 1978:178) It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on this relationship. As stated previously, success depends upon utilization of the information generated by the evaluation. Issues such as standards, frameworks and rigorous methodology must be responsive to the multi-dimensional aspects of the evaluation process.

The role of the evaluator must be understood. Evaluators are not technicians pumping out information for a client. They are applied scientists concerned with the rigor of the methodology. However, they must recognize that this rigor should be examined and applied in the context of the potential

utilization of the information generated by the evaluation process.

The nature of the program, the purposes of the evaluation and the process of the evaluation all affect methodological issues. These and other contextual issues must be considered by funders, program managers and evaluators if the perceived success of evaluations is to be enhanced.

5. INAPPROPRIATE TRAINING OF MOST EVALUATORS.

Evaluators are considered social scientists. Most receive their training in basic social science rather than applied methodology. This basic methodology conforms to the classic scientific experimental design of pre-test, post-test, experimental group - control group, with random assignment to both groups. Explanation and prediction are its underlying goals. Rossi (1978) sums up the difference between basic and applied research stating: "basic research is discipline oriented, applied research is decision oriented." The point is that they ARE different.

Success in basic research implies the generation of reliable and valid information obtained through recognized standards of methodological rigor. Success in applied research (which provides the framework for program evaluations) implies utilization of the information generated by the evaluation process. As stated above, methodological rigor in the applied field does not insure a successful evaluation.

Yet many evaluators continue to shrug off the fact that little attention is given to their findings, disclaiming responsibility since they "adhered to a methodologically sound evaluation."

In the long run this inappropriate perspective would be of diminishing importance if new developments in applied methodology were being integrated into evaluation procedures. However, even in many new courses developed specifically to train evaluators, basic social scientists continue to perpetuate the myth that basic and applied methodology are almost identical. Students are instructed that the focus on rigorous methodology and outcomes is compatible and almost synonymous with utilization issues. Other issues, such as appropriately defining needs and program responses to those needs (which are basic to good evaluations), are minimized.

This discussion is not meant to demean basic scientific methodology. Every good evaluator MUST have a thorough working knowledge of it. However, every good evaluator should also be exposed to a thorough working knowledge of the new developments in applied methodology. The reality is that many now teaching courses in evaluation "don't even know that they don't know."

Applied social scientists with considerable field experience should have a more active role in organizing courses and field placements, as well as training new applied social scientists, if we are to avoid one of the underlying causes for the perceived failure of many evaluations.

This paper has referred to five areas that influence the potential for effective program evaluations. The intent has been to draw attention to problem areas that affect the perceived success of the evaluations. The paper has suggested that if evaluations are to be perceived as a success, evaluators should play a more active role in shaping the expectations of program evaluations, as well as insuring that issues arising out of these expectations are more appropriately met.

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